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ABSTRACT

This report discusses the outcomes of the Partnerships for Rural Resource Teams Project, a project designed to build upon the foundation of services for children and youth with deaf-blindness in Montana. Grounded in a framework that draws upon the principles of collaborative teamwork, contextually-based technical assistance, family involvement, and an ecological approach to skill development, the Partnerships Project identified personnel with expertise in deaf-blindness and/or areas of programmatic support that were relevant to individuals with deaf-blindness. Project funds were then utilized to develop a deaf-blind service support model based on the purchase of necessary expertise to form an individual student planning team around those individuals with deaf-blindness whose families require more or different types of technical assistance than are currently available through the state. If the needs of a student could not be addressed by in-state resources, consultation and training by out of state experts in the needed area of specialization were available. The Partnerships Project resulted in increased access to resources for teams and families supporting students with deaf-blindness statewide. It was able to coordinate relatively limited specialized resources to achieve the maximum benefit for these families and children. The report discusses the goals and achievements of the project. (CR)

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ED 443 258

Partnerships for Rural Resource Teams:
Bringing Best Practices to Children Who Are Deaf-Blind in Montana
CFDA 84.025A - Grant #H025A50028 - Pilot Project
Year 4, Final Performance Report - 3/1/98 - 9/30-99

I. Executive Summary

This optional pilot project was designed to build upon the foundation of services for children and youth with deaf-blindness supported by Montana's IDEA Services for Children and Youth with Deaf-Blindness (State Deaf-Blind Project). Through the efforts of the State's Deaf-Blind Coordinator (Mr. Francisco Román), training and technical assistance is accessible to families and professionals who provide direct services to individuals with deaf-blindness. As the only individual responsible for delivering these services to individuals across a very large but sparsely populated state, there is a need to look to other sources to provide more intensive levels of support in situations where this is needed. The Partnerships for Rural Resource Teams Project (i.e., Partnerships Project) was conceptualized as a vehicle to address this need.

Grounded in a framework that draws upon the principles of collaborative teamwork, contextually-based technical assistance, family involvement, and an ecological approach to skill development, the Partnerships Project identified personnel with expertise in deaf-blindness and/or areas of programmatic support that were relevant to individuals with deaf-blindness. Personnel were identified from all available sources within the state (e.g., school personnel, child and family services personnel, therapists in private practice, experienced family members, etc.). Project funds were then utilized to develop a deaf-blind service support model based on the purchase of necessary expertise to form an individual student planning team around those individuals with deaf-blindness whose family and/or service providers require more or different types of technical assistance than are currently available through the State Project. If the needs of a student could not be addressed by in-state resources, consultation and training by out of state experts in the needed area of specialization was available. These experts were used not only to consult around the needs of a specific child, but also to provide training to in-state professionals which enabled them to develop skills in this area.

The Partnerships Project increased access to resources for teams and families supporting students with deaf-blindness statewide. The Project was able to coordinate relatively limited specialized resources of a large rural state to achieve the maximum benefit for these families and children. The end goal of the project was that Rural Resource Teams would become a part of the state's array of training and technical assistance services for families, service providers, and educational personnel who are involved with children and youth who are deaf-blind.

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II. Project Description

This project was designed to achieve the following goal:

> **To develop, utilize, and evaluate an innovative Rural Resource Team model for technical assistance to service providers, educators, and families of individuals with deaf-blindness that is person-centered, based on best practices, and future oriented in order to maximize the likelihood of obtaining meaningful educational outcomes for individuals with deaf-blindness.**

III. Context

The Partnerships Project was conceptualized to increase resources available to educational teams and families supporting students with deaf-blindness. There are 74 students currently identified as having a label of Deaf-blindness in Montana. Many of these students are located in rural remote towns where the needs of all students receiving special education services are supposed to be met by one general special education teacher and a handful of related services personnel all of whom may visit the student intermittently depending on the size of the school. Personnel charged to oversee quality educational planning for these students may not necessarily have expertise in severe or multiple disabilities much less deaf-blindness.

Access to training and technical assistance for staff is limited due to Montana's large size and rural nature. Small schools lack the luxury of large training budgets and may not even have available coverage to enable necessary personnel to attend trainings even if they are of no cost to the school. Prior to creating additional resources, schools and families were relying solely on one State Deaf-Blind Coordinator to provide any direction and hands on technical assistance specific to students with deaf-blindness. However, due to the large caseload, and size of the state, Francisco Roman was able to provide on site assistance to schools *on the average* of once annually.

For schools to better serve students with deaf-blindness, resources were needed to guide curriculum development and supports specific to students with dual sensory impairments. While it was recognized that valuable resources were available in many related areas, the need existed to increase expertise specific to issues, implications and support needs specific to deaf-blindness. Additionally, this assistance needed to be individualized based upon the needs of the student and family and the logistics of the school and community.

IV. How the Goals were accomplished

The status of this project during the last year and a half is described in the remainder of this section. The discussion references the workscope described in pages 47 through 52 of the originally approved grant proposal, and the timelines and assignment of responsibilities for this workscope that are detailed in pages 53 through 55 of this document. Years one and two of the project focused primarily on recruitment and training of Rural Resource Team members; years two and three were more focused on the development of systems and methods to ensure coordination and provision of technical assistance services; and year four primarily piloted these methods and procedures, revised accordingly, and developed a more individualized, child centered technical assistance and training model. The final revised model was then piloted with five collaborative teams.

Objective 1. Identify a pool of professionals and family members with diverse areas of expertise who, as members of a Rural Resource Team, collaborate to provide comprehensive technical assistance supports and training to those involved in early intervention and education of individuals concerned with children with deaf-blindness and their families.

During the first two years of the Pilot Project, recruitment efforts were undertaken by the State Coordinator and Project Coordinator at the Rural Institute, resulting in a large pool of individuals interested in serving as Rural Resource Team (RRT) members. While the original workscope called for recruitment to be limited to the western and central regions of the state (1.2, pg. 47), a more broad-based effort was undertaken so that the initial training and orientation provided to all interested applicants would not have to be repeated. A total of 55 people expressed interest in being affiliated with the RRT project, and through more informal means, additional people have become involved with these Project RRT efforts. This is a diverse group in both background and geographical location. This pool of potential team members includes Family Support Specialists, special education teachers, parents, speech/language pathologists, interpreters, occupational therapists, physical therapists, vocational rehabilitation counselors from Blind and Low Vision Services, and orientation and mobility specialists.

The benefit of such a broad-based recruitment effort was evidenced by the large number of people who took advantage of the various training opportunities available through this Project thereby increasing the knowledge base various professionals about deaf-blindness. However, it became clear that people who were identified as potential participants would not have been recruited through a more focused nomination process. The main drawback of this approach was the amount of time required for follow-up screening and selection from this large pool of interested applicants. To address this issue during the last year of the grant, training was provided on two different levels. More generic information on issues relevant to deaf-blindness was made available at state wide conferences annually and all interested people were welcomed, while the summer institute took on more of a child specific focus which included

team planning and information sessions and was conducted by invitation with a requirement that teams be cross discipline. As noted in previous reports, a more streamlined recruitment process may ultimately prove to be more efficient.

<u>Objective 2</u>. Provide a common base of information for all Rural Resource Team members in practices regarding (a) collaborative teamwork; (b) family involvement; and (c) best practice indicators in programs for children with deaf-blindness.

Materials concerning the Pilot Project and issues concerning serving children and youth with deaf-blindness have been disseminated to RRT members via the project manual. Training sessions have been offered to date to this pool of potential RRT members using various formats, including, the state's compressed video system (METNET), conference presentations and a summer institute. In addition, training provided through Montana's State Project is available to RRT potential members and there training opportunities are coordinated between the State and Pilot Projects. METNET sessions have been broadcast to 10 sites throughout the state, and taped for interested people unable to attend the session at the time it was conducted. These events were sponsored and conducted by the State and Pilot Projects' personnel. The focus on information dissemination and training evolved over the course of the 4 year project to be more child and team centered, specific that individual child's needs with the purpose of achieving specific outcomes rather than focusing on more generic topics delivered to larger audiences with the intended purpose of increased awareness. The dates and topics presented are as follows:

March/1997 Communication Issues and Deaf-Blindness: use of auditory scanning to increase choice and communication for kids who are deaf-blind - 26 people in attendance.

April/1997 Montana's Council for Exceptional Conference: continual display of assistive technology and materials for students with dual sensory impairments and networking reception for 78 people.

August/1997 Summer Institute: three days of training on communication, functional vision assessment, inclusion in regular education, auditory scanning and educational planning for 28 people.

October/1997 Dual Sensory Impairments Workshop: one day training concerning basic issues of dual sensory impairments and educational planning for students with dual sensory impairments for 50 people.

April/1998 In planning for Montana's Council for Exceptional Conference: RRT member Terry Lankutis assistive technology workshop and cosponsor with MONTECH (Montana's technology state project) a tour and open house of the Assistive Technology Center, MONTECH at the Rural

Institute on Disabilities, The University of Montana.

August/1998 Summer Institute: three days of training on functional assessment of vision and hearing, parent and family perspectives, communication, Van Dijk methodology, educational planning and assistive technology. (Presented in collaboration with the School for the Deaf and Blind in Great Falls, MT for 42 people).

April/1999 Montana's Council for Exceptional Conference: cosponsor with MONTECH (Montana's technology state project) a tour and open house of the Assistive Technology Center, MONTECH at the Rural Institute on Disabilities, The University of Montana.

August/1999 Summer Institute: two days of training on collaborative teaming and creating alternative communication systems for specific students with labels of deaf blindness; texture, PECs systems, calendar boxes were all explored. 17 people representing teams supporting 5 students with deaf-blindness were in attendance.

All potential RRT members interested in training sessions were supported to attend if needed. Training through the Pilot Project has not been as high of a priority as in the first two years. Thus, most recent training events have been through the activities of the State Project.

Objective 3. **Facilitate the opportunity for Rural Resource Team members to formulate a consistent approach to the implementation and documentation of collaborative teamwork activities, consultation, technical assistance, and follow-up to families, service providers, and educators involved with individuals who are deaf-blind.**

During the final project year the RRT manual was completed and distributed to RRT members. A completed version was also included with the final report sent to ERIC Clearing House on Disabilities and Gifted Education. The manual includes descriptive information about: the Partnerships Project, deaf-blind services in the state, the Resource loan libraries, the Assistive Technology loan bank, materials on deaf-blindness, and project forms. Forms include an application for technical assistance or trainings, a format to outline and document the technical assistance plan, and a summary of team recommendations, procedures for RRT members to bill the project, and release of information forms. Changes have been made based on the experience of teams working with students, family members, teachers and service providers.

Objective 4. Respond to student-specific requests for consultation and technical assistance by "partnering" with family members, local service providers, and educators who have responsibility for early intervention or education of an individual with deaf-blindness.

Several of the students who received support during year 4 had participated in previous years as well. Anyone identified as meeting the requirements for "deaf-blind" was eligible to request assistance from the project. Students served represent geographic diversity (i.e., students in very rural as well as urban settings), diversity of age and needs, and include representation of students who are Native American.

Initials	Primary Service Location	Number of Contacts	Priority Needs
SS -	Sidney	4	communication; computer technology, & interpreter services
CJ -	Missoula	4	education curriculum; transition planning; person centered planning
AN -	Darby	7	educational planning; communication; Inclusion
DK -	Whitehall	35	communication; educational planning; inclusion
DM -	Billings	2	communication
CW -	Anaconda	5	transition planning
GH -	Darby	11	communication; education program; transition
DW -	Missoula	7	communication; educational program; functional vision and hearing
AW -	Belgrade	20	communication; behavioral intervention; inclusion
CG -	Frenchtown	21	transition; work experience; staff training in supported employment
BO-	Baker	24	educational program; staff training; communication

Initials	Primary Service Location	Number of Contacts	Priority Needs
TS-	Sommers	2	assistive technology
DG-	Polson	3	assistive technology
HM-	Circle	10	educational program; early intervention
JR-	Worden	28	educational program; communication; basic deaf-blind training for staff

Upon referral to the project, priority needs were identified for each child through discussions with the key site personnel, family, and student observations. Based upon expertise necessary to support the technical assistance requested, amount of assistance needed and time needed, and geographic location, RRT members were identified to support that child's team. For example for DK, priority needs identified included communication and educational planning. DK's team felt that it was crucial to receive support from a person fluent in sign language, who was available to work with personnel over the summer, and was able to provide ongoing consultation to the team. The team was able to select the RRT member from two available people meeting their criteria, who best met their team's style. The RRT member assisted the team to develop and implement a communication system for DK which included symbols, objects, and sign language and individualize it for DK in the context of the next year's classroom.

In addition to onsite Technical assistance, teams also identified training that they wanted to receive or attend which coincided with the child's priority needs. Several teams were supported to attend sessions on Picture Exchange Communication Systems, and other teams attended the state of Idaho's Deaf-Blind Summer Institute.

<u>Objective 5</u>. Supplement the expertise of Rural Resource Team members, families, service providers, and educators by utilizing experts in areas of specialization that are not represented within the existing pool of Rural Resource Team members.

Rural Resource Team members have been supported to further develop their expertise through the following activities:

- Scholarships were been made available to RRT members to attend 1998 &1999 pre-conference workshops at Montana's CEC Conference. Sessions were conducted by Brent Bailey on Orientation and Mobility, Deb Hedeen on Visual strategies for

Communication and positive behavioral supports, and Jo Mascorro on Communication.

- One team attended a week long institute on Deaf-Blindness sponsored by the Idaho deaf-blind project.

- 10 RRT people attended training in Billings and Bozeman, MT in 1999 conducted by Deb Hedeen on Picture Exchange Communication Symbols and positive behavioral supports.

- 2 RRT members attended the annual TASH conference to gather more information about inclusion for students with severe disabilities in regular education classrooms.

- 1 parent attended a workshop on deaf-blindness presented by Helen Keller Center.

- 1 parent was supported to participate in a workshop on Traumatic Brain Injury.

The Project did not bring in out of state experts to specifically consult about any particular child. However, RRT members did seek the advice of the above presenters/experts concerning children who are being served by the State and/or Pilot Projects.

Objective 6. Provide technical assistance and follow-up support to Rural Resource Teams in order to enhance their delivery of individualized local training and technical assistance services to family members, service providers, and educators.

Project staff have continued to provide TA and support to teams involved with 13 children with dual sensory impairments. A variety of methods have ben used to provide follow-up, including, face-to-face meetings, telephone conferencing, email, and sharing resources and materials. Using videotapes as a means of communication and documentation is a strategy which was explored this past year and was quite successful. Given the geography, distances between communities and time limitations of RRT members, it is important for the project to continue to investigate alternative strategies for efficiently and effectively conducting follow-up activities.

Objective 7. Develop and disseminate Pilot Project information materials and products designed to enhance the delivery of model Rural Resource Team services.

During the initial year of the funding period and in collaboration with dissemination efforts undertaken by the State Project, project brochures were developed and widely disseminated across the state, using vehicles such as the Family Support Services Advisory Council (Part C, formerly Part H, IDEA's interagency council), state and regional level CSPD councils, regional and state conferences, and training events for parents, early intervention service providers, teachers, special education administrators and health and human service providers. Dissemination activities are ongoing and certain activities are routinely conducted

on a fixed schedule (e.g., beginning of each school year). As noted in previous reports, a project lending library has been established at the Rural Institute on Disabilities at The University of Montana for the Pilot Project designed to be responsive to the specific needs of RRT members. This library compliments the State Project's affiliation with Parent's Let's Unite with Kids library on disabilities issues, including the area of deaf-blindness. An informational presentation about the project was developed and presented at the annual NTAC Conference and Project Directors' meetings in Washington, D.C.. Project information is distributed annually at statewide CEC and Developmental Disabilities conferences.

Objective 8. Coordinate and collaborate in the implementation of Pilot Project services and model practices.

This Project continues to work in collaboration with the State Project in most areas, including training and information dissemination. A single brochure about OPI services in the area of Deaf-Blindness describes both programs, which illustrate the close ties between the Pilot and State Projects' efforts. The Projects share an Advisory Group that is associated with the state level CSPD Council. The intent is to consistently convey the link between the two projects, so that the Partnerships Project is seen as an extension of the state's basic services.

On a child level, the activities discussed in previous reports continue. For instance, the state's Deaf-Blind Coordinator, Mr. Francisco Román, takes the lead in identifying students to be involved in pilot interventions as well as participates on the teams formed for each of the pilot students. Conversely, students not yet on the state's deaf-blind census have been identified by the Partnerships Project staff, resulting in a referral to Francisco Román.

Efforts proceed to ensure that the Project is coordinated with other agencies and ongoing activities within the state are ongoing (8.3 - 8.5, pg. 51). Personnel involved in the Pilot and State Projects are active in other statewide efforts and organizations focused on services to people with disabilities in Montana. The fact that the disability education and service systems in Montana is a relatively small "community" of people facilitates the collaboration between and across projects. As reflected in the timeline (pg. 55), this is an ongoing aspect of this project.

Key areas of coordination include participation with Montana's FSSAC (Part C of IDEA interagency council), CSPD and Developmental Disabilities Planning and Advisory Council. The Projects' Directors are involved with the Montana's State Improvement Plan and Grant (IDEA) for special education services, to assure that the training and technical assistance priorities of personnel serving students with low incidence conditions, like deaf-blindness, are well represented. The State Project's Coordinator is directly involved with the changes in Montana special education rules, regulations and guidelines made necessary by the reauthorization of IDEA (1997). Further, the Project is more closely involved with statewide assistive technology initiatives, such as MONTECH.

Objective 9. Evaluate the process and impact of the Partnerships for Rural Resource Team Project.

Initially the primary focus of the Project was on the identification and training of RRT members, and evaluative information was gathered on issues related to these individuals. This included information about their individual training needs and areas of expertise, as well as their response to training events that have been provided to date. Now, the evaluation focus is broadening to encompass what happens as a result of RRT intervention. Evaluation focuses on the impact of project technical assistance, impact on child change, and service satisfaction. Further, evaluation tools and methods are being developed in conjunction with the State Project so that these items and procedures are either the same or at least compatible.

Objective 10. Manage project implementation to ensure the timely and effective completion of activities and objectives.

A system to monitor progress toward completion of project activities is in place, involving periodic phone or face-to-face meetings with the State Coordinator (10.1 - 10.3, pg. 52). As noted in previous reports, due to changes in workload assignments for Co-Directors Ted Maloney and Gail McGregor, Ellen Condon (.5 FTE across Pilot and State Projects) was hired at the Rural Institute in April of 1996 (10.5, 10.6, pg. 52). While the total amount of effort committed to this project remains the same, a redistribution of responsibility assignments has occurred (10.1, 10.5) to reflect changes in project FTE commitments. Co-Director Ted Maloney bear the primary responsible for the overall project and budgetary management and state-level coordination, Co-Director Gail McGregor is primarily involved in the evaluation of project activities, and Project Coordinator Ellen Condon is responsible for the day to day activities of the Pilot Project.

V. Obstacles Encountered and how they were Solved:

Throughout the Project development and implementation there were several aspects of the original approach to organization and utilization of Rural Resource Teams that were reconsidered and operationalized by different means. The first issue concerned the selection of RRT members and formation of teams. Our initial attempt to identify potential resources involved a statewide recruitment flyer soliciting people who might be interested in deaf-blindness and in serving as consultants to the project. The response was surprisingly large. Project personnel were frustrated in the amount of time required to wade through applicants to determine background, skills, and potential match with the guiding principles of the project. However, the one benefit to the large scale recruitment was that several people with skills in deaf-blindness emerged whom we otherwise might have overlooked. However, what the project needed was a consistent core group of people skilled to provide assistance corresponding to the needs identified by the teams requesting support, and to the guiding principles of the project. These needs cited by teams tended to be fairly consistent across

students and correspond to issues cited in deaf-blind literature: communication, orientation & mobility, social issues, behavioral issues... As the project progressed we tended to utilize the services of a core group of approximately 5 people whom had exhibited the skills needed. At least one of these individuals was not even discovered during the initial recruitment efforts but was referred by another agency working with a student.

This leads to the second barrier we encountered in the area of team members. Because the individuals we utilized as consultants were contractors, not employees, training and supervision to ensure quality control and establish a common philosophical basic of operation were and are complicated. Additionally, we encountered difficulties negotiating release time for some staff especially those employed by schools to work in different locations for our project. Having the team members employed by one entity such as the Office of Public Instruction could alleviate these issues.

The other major change in the structure of the project was the "Rural Resource team concept". Initially we conceptualized that a group of consultants, representative of all necessary disciplines, would convene and proceed on into a school to offer assistance around a student. Bringing together several contractors to provide assistance did not make them a "team" and from our experience we found it too cumbersome and quite ineffective to bring too many outside resources together who were not used to working together to provide assistance to the school. What we found worked better was to have a lead Rural Resource member who represented the project serve as a facilitator to assess and organize individual student priorities and develop a plan with the student's team for project assistance and follow through. We discovered that it was far more important to support and enhance the role of the student's existing team which usually was large enough already based upon the complexity of the student's needs. The other step that we took in year 4 was to support the development of students' teams was to invite entire teams to training which dedicated some time to teaching team building and communication skills and always maintained a particular student focus in teaching additional skills.

expertise in the areas that represent the most frequently identified programmatic needs. These areas included: creating alternative communication systems for both receptive and expressive communication; positive behavioral supports; basics of Deaf-blindness; functional curriculum; and meaningful and inclusive curriculum content.

The feedback from our last summer institute was that people liked having the opportunity to meet other teams from around the state. However from our experience we are finding that teams need ongoing assistance to implement the strategies they learn in the context of the child's day at school and at home. The geography and ruralness of our state requires us to provide assistance in the most resource conservation method. Travel is typically time intensive and therefor costly therefor we need to make the most of our onsite visits by being prepared and being able to offer ideas and solutions while we are on site rather than spending time observing. The last year of the grant we began asking schools to submit video tapes for

Resource team members to view prior to traveling out to sites. Other mechanisms of information exchange should continue to be explored to enable the maximum amount of assistance to be provided within a reasonable cost parameters.